

Art Offers Creative Solution to Juvenile Crime

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Implementation of the "new approach" highlighted in Bill Stanczykiewicz's Oct. 2 article, "Creative collaboration breaks juvenile crime cycle," is critical to restoring the safety of our community -- not to mention saving kids along the way.

Indiana Artitude Inc. began working with students at the Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility one year ago, connecting art and artists with incarcerated youth.

It is too early to define any long-term effects of this program; however, Artitude is modeled after similar programs in seven other states that have resulted in increased job skills, improved behavior, and lower recidivism rates.

Some readers may question the practical benefits of an art program for incarcerated youth. Historically, art has been viewed by many as a "frill," even in the public schools. But researchers such as Deborah Prothrow Stith of the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center are discovering real benefits from art programs with high-risk youth.

A majority of incarcerated youth at the Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility face significant emotional and academic challenges. These students most typically have not experienced success in the traditional classroom setting. They learn best through accommodation of a variety of learning styles and hands-on activities. Real learning occurs when students are emotionally engaged. Arts-based activities lend themselves to the development of all types of skills necessary for success.

An example of such an activity is the shrine that IJCF students have just completed for the Indianapolis Art Center's Day of the Dead Exhibition Oct. 23-Nov. 5. (The art center, located at 820 E. 67th St., Indianapolis, will conduct tours of its altar and shrine displays during that time, as well as hold a free celebration from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. Oct. 28.)

For the Day of the Dead project, students had to use a variety of skills, including research (Day of the

Dead traditions), math (measurements of coverings and item placement), communications (working collaboratively with a group), creativity (sculpting and painting components of the shrine) and fun. The students were so engaged, they gladly would have devoted far more hours to this project than Artitude was able to provide.

As for improved behavior, Artitude artists see these kids demonstrate very positive behavior on a weekly basis. As one student commented at the end of a clay workshop, "You can stay longer because we don't have anything to do now, and this keeps us out of trouble."

While working on a fabric-painting project, another student requested permission to go talk to his sergeant. When asked why he wanted to leave the group, he replied, "I'm going to tell Sarg this is the kind of stuff we need to be doing on the weekends."

Another student, who was to be released from the facility in a week, commented: "It's going to be hard to decide what to do when I go back . . . I'm good at painting now; I know how to do clay sculpture and I'm pretty good at acting."

These students' experiences prove that art is a creative solution to juvenile crime, not just a frill.

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.

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